University of Massachusetts Amherst

Ruined Entrances

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RUINED ENTRANCES

A Thesis Presented

by

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IF THERE WAS A BOOK ABOUT THIS HALLWAY

It would start, There is a road within the home
some pine slats in the corner
and lamps along the walls that give the path an endlessness
at night.

I remember the day I left the meterman standing in the hall.
In my room I drew his hard apple face as it waited
in the cold shade.
No matter how slight, it is a scene from history.
A scene from the book, I thought.

Are dreams set in hallways because the perspective is
screwed.
Or because they are the long, open, unused stages in our
homes.
The hallway was a dry riverbed I dreamed one night,
an indian turnpike on another.

(and it may have been those things before the house was
here.
If this book existed, I'd look in the index
under river and trail to see.)

I never heard the meterman leave but saw that he was gone
when I went out to hang his sketch on the wall.
Sour furniture polish winds rolled down the dark corridor.

Once a fir where each door now stands.

If Christ had died in a hallway we might pray in hallways
or wear little golden hallways around our necks.
How can it still be unwarmed after so many passings.
An outdoors that is somehow indoors.

A second New York is being built
a little west of the old one.
Why another, no one asks,
just build it, and we do.

It's still closed off to all but the work crews
who claim it's a perfect mirror image.
Truthfully, each man works on the replica
of the apartment building he lives in,
and they've since added new touches,
like cologne dispensers, rock gardens,
and doorknobs originally marked for the grand hotels.

Improvements here and there, done secretly
and off the books. None of the supervisors
seem to notice or mind. Everyone's in a
wonderful mood, joking, taking walks
through the still streets that the single reporter
who's been allowed inside has described as

unleavened with reminders of the old city's complicated past
but giving off some blue perfume from the early years on
earth.

Over months the men grow to love the peaceful town.
It becomes more difficult to return home at night,

which sets the wives to worrying,
the yellow soups are cold, the sunsets quick.

The men take long breaks on the fire escapes,
waving across the quiet spaces to other workers
meditating on their perches.

Toolbelts rattle in the rising wind.

Something is wrong. A foreman stands in the avenue
pointing binoculars at a massive gray mark
moving towards us in the eastern sky.

Several voices, what, what is it?
Pigeons, he yells through the wind.

SNOW

Walking through an ice field with my younger brother Seth
I pointed to a place where kids had made angels in the snow
and then, for some reason, told him that a troop of angels
had been shot and dissolved when they hit the ground.
He asked who had shot them and I said a farmer.

Now we were on the roof of the lake. The ice looked like a
photograph of water.
Why he asked. Why did he shoot them.
I didn't know where I was going with this.
They were on his property, I said.

When it's snowing, the immediate outdoors seem like a room
to me.
Today I traded hellos with my neighbor and our voices hung
close in the new acoustics.
A room with the walls blasted to shreds and falling.
We returned to our shoveling, working side by side in
silence.

But why were they on his property, he asked.

PROFESSOR WALNUTSCALP AND THE SLEEPING GAS MYSTERY

His house had white brick balconies, chiseled drapes and starcharts beneath the wallpaper. There was a mud racetrack out back where a smacked up car with garlands of nicks in the paint waited lamely in the grass.

We found a burnt keyboard by the millrace and blackbirds stacked in the cabinets, and heard how the house makes little cracking
sounds when he gets up in the morning to wade through pages of labyrinthine Spanish logic or dismantle chunks of mica.

The professor told us how a herald on a dirtbike broke up the driveway bearing hill testimony from a cult called The People, and how something felt wrong when he heard a boat hiss below the planks and the man say "where is my silencer?"

Sometimes driveways develop endzones so more imaginary Swedens
can rise from the bottom of the book, but in our historical reassessment of the "Redcoats" we forget the peace in a name like James or the long rainy Indian wars, fought primarily

in the nude. Of course, the squad feels new in new rooms and our attention often clots on a detail, like this scotch tape, clear as a highland stream, repairing file folders entitled "How car keys think" and "Not a still life but a slow life then".

During investigations the void may bloom in the mirror like twin wedding dresses on a high thin bed but these apparitions
are not evidence, they're not even legal. It's all slush at the foxes feet, a frieze of braille or a picture of the isotopes.

He'd had hot and cold conversations in dead languages for years, yet the installation and plugging in of moons, the slight changes in the rules of tennis, the thought that "we could be losing" never crossed. There was no "we".

In the great songs where all human memories intersect, where,
in story, the devil lets a carton of milk set on the counter for thirty years and french horns rise up like clarions for a wolfpack, in those jet paragraphs all this was foretold.

Did hate come flipping down his arms, was he ready for life,
for its air and dark minerals when the gas had worn off
and the blood on his forehead had been cooled by a wind
(reimagined as ivory to those struck blind in childhood)

that blew open the door, bearing our sirens?

A web of sewer, pipe and wire connects each house to the others.
In 206 a dog sleeps by the stove, where a small gas leak causes him
to have visions; visions that are rooted in nothing but gas.
Next door, a man who has decided to buy a car part by part, excitedly unpacks a wheel and an ashtray.
He arranges them every which way. Its really beginning to take shape.
Another neighbor, a salesman of hymnals, leans back into his olive reclining chair, listening to a voice in the air conditioning.
Out the window he sees a group of ugly children entering the forest.
Their mouths look like coin slots.
Nearby, a local cover band is preparing for an engagement at the high school prom. They pack their equipment in silence.
Last night they played the police academy ball where all the officers slow danced with target range silhouettes.

This year the theme for the prom is the Tetragrammaton.
A yellow Corsair sails through the disco parking lot
as swaying palms presage the lot of young libertines.
Inside the car, a young lady wears a corsage of bullet-sized

rodents. Her date, the handsome cornerback, stretches his talons over the molded steering wheel.

They park and walk into the lush starlit gardens behind the disco as the band strikes up.

Their keen eyes and ears twitch. The other couples look beautiful tonight. They stroll around listening to the brilliant conversation. The passionate speeches.

Clouds drift across the silverware. There is red larkspur, blue gum, and ivy. A boy kneels before his date.

And the moon, I forgot to mention the moon.

CORAL GABLES

She wore a dress of voting booth curtains
to a party at the coroner's split level ranch.
As she dashed up the quartz pebble lane
a bell pushed by the wind rang.

Her initial entrance was unrecorded.
Under the wagon wheel chandelier
a bible story shot back through her mind
whirling and open to the page
"You shall meet a stranger."

A man worked his wife over in the foyer,
"That agent seemed to like you,
he kept his car running in the driveway
and you rushed out to it."

She stared at the storms in the wood's grain.

A nervous young man whispered from behind her,
"I hired a detective to investigate myself,
It was as act of religious passion.
He's probably here at this party, watching me."

She stepped backwards, over a dog jackknifed on the rug,
and met a scholar who spoke of an ad he had discovered
running unanswered for one hundred years.
He would not contaminate its beauty by answering it.

It was late when she left with a man who had carved
a government agency's initials into a tree as a teenager.

"I refuse to be the middleman in a relationship
between you and the florist."
As they walked through the forest,
he explained why he would never buy her flowers.

THE DOUBLE BELL OF HEAT

Midway down Walnut Street there's a yellow sign
that says Slow Deaf Child,
with the silhouette of a running boy

painted over the bent and dented surface.
Just the post, rusted to black, gives it all away.

The child must have grown up
and left the neighborhood a long time ago.

And now there's this sign.

You can imagine his parents going to the city clerk's office
They had seen one just like it across town
so they were sure it was possible.

The paperwork is strange and complex, falling into
obscure categories of Time where it languishes and drifts.

Then one spring morning the deaf boy sees two city workers
get out of a truck and set the bright sign
in the patch of grass between the sidewalk and street.

The boy watches it out the window, knowing what it is,
watching it gather the world around it
like a mountain in the Bible.

Cars heed the sign, many drivers scanning to the left
and right hoping to catch sight of the deaf boy playing.

Some drivers imagine hitting him and slow down even more.
They play out the scene, what they would say,
how their lives would change.

And the years pass, even for the little deaf boy
who grasps the concept of time a bit later than most.

He gets married, has kids.
Maybe moves to a quiet village in New England.

You can imagine him returning to the old neighborhood.
Driving down on a fall afternoon into the quiet center of
things, gently braking before this old street sign.

He would do that, he would come back.
As if it had been written twice.

I did nothing more than walk to the window and throw open the curtains, but somewhere in that simple combination of movements I felt a small era pass away before it could be named.

I saw a thirty year old papier-mache Jupiter in the back of a Hollywood prop room, yellowed fishing line still attached,

and the appliance failures on Olive Street, the grapefruit juice burning in my mouth and the neighborhood birds whistling
precambrian songs.

When I was young I'd scare myself by imagining a warlock pacing in the gallery of a salt mine, plotting to burn town and country, laughing as he climbed up a narrow staircase that led to a door in the back of my closet; his embassy.

Now I'm scared that there are no secrets like that. Afraid that, inside the wall there is insulation, and beyond it, just the regular outdoors that we all know.

I still like to come to the window and cast my eyes on it all,
to see the wind in the tension of the blown trees, to look up at the moon and pretend that it's illuminated by our attention,

but now, when something passes in the dark, I have to tell its side of the story.

I am passing someone in the dark, it thinks...

CIVICS

She had been the court stenographer
in the little village for two decades
when she disappeared into the mountains.

I was part of the search party that day.
Snow was pending and the bare branches
looked like mounted antlers on the canyon walls.

I walked with Glenn from White Moon Insurance
for hours through columns of shimmering firs
and over ponds frozen into opal tables

until, arriving at an overlook at dusk,
we heard the cracking of a hammer
echoing through the burnished valley
and saw what looked like the old judge
and twelve other men and women pitching camp for the night.

took a room at the Colonial Motor Lodge, sat down at the desk
and began to write.

"What began as a dream eventually developed into a log cabin, over time eroding into ruins, memory, and finally dream again."

Outside, winter laid ox-bows of wet light onto the park. Life forms clicked and clawed at the soil that had locked them out.

A kid stood there, about to break a green bottle. Life was, once again, very lifelike.

"...now that the dead are anyone's property."

A man sat on a park bench, seemingly torn between waiting and remembering.

"I'm haunted by the insistent pulse I hear while scuba diving, by the idea that the mind might climb to wider scopes or simply cram the night with taxis..."

A cardboard colored dog paused downwind from the offices of Southern Pulmonary.

"...torn between waiting and remembering, our minds are like candles in a crevasse, potted plants in an unfinished lobby."

It was here at this very intersection, two hundred and ten years before, that the governor's carriage had come through and turned over in the rutted road.

"... but the now keeps coming. It's like wrestling your father. He pins you down and you cannot move."

The heap lay silent. Wig powder billowed out the windows.

The narrator was shot by the sniper he was describing and I quickly picked up his pen.

What luck, I thought, to be sitting up here in the narrator's
tower where the parking lots look like chalkboards and the characters scurry around or fall down and die as I design it.

Then I started to read the novel I had inherited, and didn't like a lot of what I saw.

Most of the characters were relentlessly evil, taken right off the bad streets of the Bible.

The narrator would interrupt the story at all the wrong times, like a third wheel on a date, and deliver shakey opinions like "People who wear turtlenecks must have really fucked up necks."

Then he would get lost in pointless investigations, i.e. Was Pac-Man an animal, so that when we returned to the characters many pages later, their hair had grown past the shoulder and their fingernails were inches long.

In support of the novel, I must say that it was designed well. The scenes were like rowhouses. They had common sidewalls, through which one could hear the faint voices and footsteps of what was to come.

I've lived those long driving scenes. Everyone knows how hard it is, after you've been on the road all day, to stop driving. You go to sleep and the road runs under the bed like a filmstrip.

I also liked the sheriff's anxious dream sequence, where he keeps putting a two-inch high man in jail, and the small man keeps walking out, in between the bars.

After a sleepless night he's woken by the phone. There's a sniper in the University tower. The sheriff stands before the bathroom mirror. Drops of visine are careening down his face.

They are cold and clear
and I can count them through my rifle scope.

When he started writing the Night Nurse Essays
the idea was to patch together a book
that described itself over and over again,
comprised of thousands of black chains
that were dragged through green rocks and river stairs
to arrive haunted, unscheduled and lit from above.

There were days of long ideas
when he felt his book was ineffective
like a watercolor of a fire engine
or a statue of the fastest man alive.

He would go to the window and watch the fireflies
flash "fuck you" "fuck you" "fuck you",
then turning around, see his wife Asterisk
lifting dinner to the table.

One night, up considering dead realms,
he heard the sustained woof of a dog.
It drew him up and propelled him outside
to walk cowed under the fierce starlight.

He crossed against the light at
the corner of Night School and Fake Badge

concentrating so hard on certain experimental
passages of the Declaration of Independence
that he did not notice

the woman rising up from behind a mailbox
wearing a necklace strung of diary keys.
"Help me you jerk," she whispered,
"I'm losing my reflection."

She dragged a lame foot behind her
into the Onyx Lounge.
He stood and watched the night
push itself into the bar
and the light push it back out.

Across the street he saw a weatherman leave
the TV studio and slip into his sedan,
heading one mile south to his home
in a slightly warmer neighborhood.

He couldn't go back home to sleep,
not back to his unorganized dreams,
always set on the concourses of dead airports.
(His essays filling the seat pockets of empty jets.)

That was when he decided to walk down
to Jewish Name Lake, to sit by the shore
and wait for the sunrise.

That's where they found the body.

"My sentences tend to be longer in the summer".
You can imagine him thinking some such thing
as the locust songs lull him to sleep.

The light is multiplying and for the first time
in hours the wind begins to stir. It loosens
a sprig of poison berries from an overhanging branch
and drops them into his open mouth.

An old rabbit approaches, grabs his wallet
and hops away. Two vines wrap around his ankles
and yank him into the lake.

Pulled down through the cool green chambers
he struggles awake and realizes
that he's finally seeing rain
in its original, uncut form.

WELL, WASHINGTON...

I'm starting this up all of a sudden,
when her hands, curved in the shape of C's,
turn in the air above the table like chained birds
above a deserted subdivision,
calling for a long talk

with "you" and your little tail of vowels.

This time of year the light comes through the pines
in flat beams and sparkpoints, glancing off the frost
that decorates the grounds of the light studded medical
cities.

The November sky hovers overhead like a televised clay bank,

holding up a dotted line
drawn from the binoculars to the bird,
while the skeletons of redcoats crumble
beneath our pounding sidewalks.

I am shivering, reading cold northeastern prose
as an upturned wig filled with eggs, rocks gently on the
chair.

There is a word for what we do, but we do it anyway,
carefully setting dinner on the table uncooked,
before setting the table on fire.

A woman whispers to her sugar bowl,
"slowly, over time, you will be lent to the neighbors."

At the bus terminal, behind the candy machine,
there is a tunnel that comes out in the prison library,

all pinned to a shimmering screen by the slide projector's
cone of lit dust.

Can I safely say that Greece was mainly
water, rock, and ideas?
That the charge of the light brigade,
was like a chunk of ice pulled streaming
from the planet's brow?

My stats show that several thousand years of rain
have done little damage to the planet,
yet imagine if that amount had fallen indoors.

Imagine this girl, a winsome beauty previously existing
only on a rejected coin design, imagine her extant

and driving through the old seaboard slave states,
with a treasury of college fight songs,
"in the tape deck".

The rose bushes look like latin homework
on the pond's reflective skin.

Like a "hullo!" up a rainpipe, it bears me homeward,

not asking for a quick peek at the shade inside objects,

but simply admiring the precambrian skyline of the car keys
that took us away from that colony of motels
scattered like mushrooms about the beltway's exit ramp.

And yet it's so strange that we've come to this,
and to think that someday we'll come back to it
from the opposite direction.

On the streets I look out for people from the future.
They try to play it cool so no one notices, taking taxis,
calling the driver "Mac", in what they mistakenly
believe to be the lingo of the day.

When I see L.A. fireplaces reflected in L.A. wine glasses
and crows wired to the sky like marred pixels,
I start to believe that the inscription above the portal
describes this side, not the next.

For now just keep smiling and nodding
as if you were in a foreign country,

painfully grasping a pineapple.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN THE RAIN

Announcement: All pupils named Doug.

Please come to the lounge on Concourse K.

Please join us for coffee and remarks.

Dougs: We cannot come. We are injured by golf cleats.

Announcement: Today we will discuss the energy in a wing and something about first basemen.

Ribs will be served in the cafeteria.

Pep Club: We will rally against golf cleats today.

The rally will be held behind the gymnasium.

There is a Model T in the parking lot with its lights on.

Dougs: We are dying in the nurse's office.

When she passes before the window, she looks like a bride.

Karen (whispers): We are ranking the great shipwrecks.

Announcement:In the classroom filled with dishwater light.

Share your thoughts on public sculpture.

All: O Dougs, where are you?

Dougs: In the wild hotels of the sea.

THE WAR IN APARTMENT 1812

Years have been lashed onto years,
shellacking the fruits of anatomy
behind curtains of red muslin
while all the objects of perception
waited for us in the air conditioning.

I'd like to know if you can remember
when pears lit up the black bark tree
and rain came down on the gulf station
or the pastures on the back of the nickel,
falling hard and clean upon everything.

There was a skull and a christmas tree,
a flask of white hill whiskey
on the walnut secretary,
all things rigid in their arrangements,
coiled in autumn's marble,

and you couldn't trust them to remain.

COMING IN

"The stage is slow and stuffed with naturalism" - James Agee

He walks through New York's famed Argument District. On street corners and behind store windows, men are standing in pairs, using old world hand gestures, angrily communicating their love of business, order, belts, rings

and hair. A busload of senior citizens drifts by. From behind the green glass they gaze at all the people and crashing lights. If someone had told him that their bus was lost and that they'd been riding around for months in total silence, He would have believed

them. Later, when he reads his diary, he will be split.

In Brooklyn, Polish words are painted on metal and wooden signs hung above the stores. The sun is setting behind a newsstand when he sees the headline "Brooklyn Boys Swept Out to Sea In Inner Tubes."

He's always done this, walked around the neighborhood at night looking for ideas. He watches the lit-up living rooms and storefronts, imagining what character might walk in and stir the standing water.

There is an artificial limbs supply store on a side street so ignored it has disappeared from fire department and post office maps. One afternoon he watched a young man with no visible handicaps walk into the store.

He was standing across the street, pretending to examine a forty year old soda bottle he'd found in the gutter. The customer asked a question and the storekeeper shook his head until strands of his oiled gray hair swung down from their tiers. Reading his lips he thought the customer had asked about getting

a tail. For no reason at all, not a single one he could think of,
he then left the city in a rented car. What's that old word? Automatic.

He kept driving. The road had all her branches but there was no confusion in the mind of the driver.

A day passed inside the car. When he reached the little town east of Natchez called Figure in the Woods, he parked and slept for a few hours. In the back seat he dreamed about a shotgun that had birdcalls coming out the muzzle.

When he woke up it was daylight and he was surrounded by a life. Flat brown workhorses drifting in a field, trees flickering like an old film, the wind whistling through the hooves of a goat...

He drove into town searching for a real estate office. By the time he found one he was starting to feel the machinery of his watch through the top of his wrist.

He cupped his hands around his eyes, looking through the glass front at the old rhythms of the wall calendars and the shafts of sunlight shooting through the office like morning's searchlights.

Inside, the agent lifted his head. He straightened his tie and leaned back in his chair to wait.

I enjoyed the training film. There were beautiful shots of black sedans pulling up alongside curbs, closeups of gleaming city shoes as they were earnestly wiped on doormats. There were speeches and conversions, scenes where the merchandise became a third character. I enjoyed the paradoxical sequence where the salesmen were trying to sell to each other, and the film's heartbreaking final scene when the weeping Nazi answered the doorbell.

IMAGINING DEFEAT

She woke me up at dawn
her suitcase like a little brown dog at her heels.

I sat up and looked out the window
at the snow falling in the stand of blackjack trees.
A bus ticket in her hand.

Then she brought something black up to her mouth,
a plum I thought, but it was an asthma inhaler.

I reached under the bed for my menthols
and she asked if I ever thought of cancer.

Yes, I said, but always as a tree way up ahead
in the distance where it doesn't matter.

And I suppose a dead soul must look back at the tree
so far behind his wagon where it also doesn't matter

except as a memory of rest or water.

Though to believe any of that, I thought,
you have to accept the premise
that she woke me up at all.

THIS IS ALWAYS ABOUT 1870

A bird that never lands
flying on and on

over the wide stunned plains
where men go to die or advance

in the blue mornings
and in the bronze evenings

the killer comes through a cloud of light.

He knows the size of the rain
and how to control the trails.

He's a character inhabited by an actor
another character warns

his bottle swinging up
like a mailbox flag

at the storm that is allegedly on its way.

Men come over the mountain like new water
and sunlight rubs the smoking rocks.

An audience of clouds rolls in
above the shifting arrangement of horses.

Your last words will be treasured
above all your others...

the Marshall says to the killer

drawing a camera from his war darkened coat.

Michael rowed the boat ashore and moored it on a gnarled stake. He reached into the fold of his turtleneck sweater and pulled out a map drawn on the back of a wallet-sized photograph. In a clump of cattails he found the beat-up giftbox marked "evil shit" with his orders attached. Pulses of fear weakened his arms. He pulled out the photo of his lady-in-waiting and drew strength from her thick healthy hair, the color of almonds and saddles.

A wide plain stretched out before him like an old document encased in glass. A rickety black carriage contaminated with rubella waited for him. He massaged the inoculation marks on his arm as the rig perambulated across the bare ranchland.

After many hours he arrived at a hacienda. He was brought into a room where a spectrum of fruit and meats the color of makeup were spread across a rough table. Michael ate slowly, at the pace of his own thoughts, staring out the window at a gang of shimmering black retrievers playing in the distant grass.

He slept further down the road in the shack marked on his map. It was set in a little chaparral of short dry trees. Inside, there was a strong fire going and two sets of tracks on the floor. One walking backwards dragging the

other's heels through the dirt. The shack was wallpapered with Sears catalogues. Black sewing machines floated like deathships on the walls.

In the morning he traveled further into the countryside periodically reading his printed instructions which began "Our chief resolve..."

At midday he arrived at the forest's edge where he found a smoldering campfire that looked like the ruins of a medieval city. A few minutes passed during which he knew he was being watched by his contact. Finally a gaucho emerged from the foliage astride a gigantic Appaloosa. His hip holsters held two large aerosol canisters. The gaucho introduced himself as Manuel as he handed Michael one of the cans.

"What is this for?"

"Every object in space is a memory system. You will need it."

Michael let it pass. Manuel dismounted and explained that his horse was named Treinta y Tres after Uruguay's thirty-three founding fathers as he tied it to a fallen log.

He lifted up a heavy bough as if it were a tent flap and motioned for Michael to follow him into the woods.

"What about the box?"

"Leave it."

They entered the woods and walked silently apace. There was no variance to the forest. Every hundred yards seemed to repeat the features of the last. Pendulous hives and sad little creeks appeared rhythmically as if the landscape were a primitive computer program.

"Manuel, can you tell me why I've been sent here, what the purpose of my mission is?"

"Only that people have been waiting for years."

Manuel quickly changed the subject to the Battle of San Cosme Gate which was fought in these woods. He illustrated the flight of arrows with his fingers and traced battle plans on his palms as they walked. This took many hours and brought them to a clearing where a large white meetinghouse or church drew the woodlands all around it.

It looked deserted. Cats circuited the building like worms about a skull. Michael grabbed the gaucho's arm.

"Manuel, please prepare me, tell me why I am here."

He wrested his arm from Michael and shook his head darkly.

"The world doesn't have a name, my friend. You have seen the signatures fade."

Michael pulled out his map and instructions. He gasped. The paper was blank.

They entered the dim meetinghouse. Curved benches filled with peasants surrounded a small sand covered stage.

They took a seat in the back just as a man in a black turtleneck mounted the stage with an acoustic guitar.

"Who is he?"

"He has come to tell your story."

The audience looked like they had been waiting for years. The musician adjusted his chair in the deep sand. He looked up into the rafters for a moment as if searching for more time. When there was none left he began to sing.

On the moon, an old caretaker in faded clothes is holed up in his pressurized cabin. The fireplace is crackling, casting sparks onto the instrument panel. His eyes are flickering over the earth,

looking for Illinois,

looking for his hometown, Gnarled Heritage,

until his sight is caught in its chimneys and frosted aerials.

He thinks back on the jeweler's son who skated on a pond behind his house, and the local supermarket with aisles that curved off like country roads.

Yesterday the robot had been asking him about snowmen.
He asked if they had minds.
No, the caretaker said, but he'd seen one
that had a raccoon burrowed up inside the head.

"Most had a carrot nose, some coal, buttons, and twigs for arms,
but others were more complex.
Once they started to melt, things would rise up

from inside the body. Maybe a gourd, which was an organ, or a long knobbed stick, which was the spine of the snowman."

The robot shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

1.

From a side room someone calls me to the phone,
"It sounds long distance",
and I see another version of the room
as I pass the mirror.

"An actress is dead.
Well, the actress seems dead."
Her body discovered, casually gored,
in the back seat of a forty year old car
full of larks.

2.

It's as dark as two nights at once
when I drive down to the marble company yards
to search for evidence.
An old southern werewolf with one charred vocal cord
shows me a horn covered in bloody fur
and a damning white cane in the shrubbery,
all the while talking in some reversed language.

I leave him and break into the offices.
It's quiet enough to hear the gears of a spider
ratcheting over the stricken typewriters

that have never typed "everlasting righteousness",
or "spiritual warfare".

3.

I've seen so much that I can't explain,
closets full of distance,
stains filled with images,
and crimes so pure they have no structure.
I can't fault the man who believes
in tunnels below the graves.

The night has the quiet sucking power
of a revolving door. The tallest building
known to man, threaded with relentless elevators
that shuttle the worn out, crushed, and shot
to a distant place not unlike here.

4.

The witnesses will not give up what they know.
They are like a sea that hides its mountains,
or the hidden spaces inside an acronym.
But I know, as sure as ancient languages
come out the mouths of sick children,
that I will break this case.

5.

Sure enough, In the back of a junk shop
I find a painting of the assassination,
already coated in dust.

The murderer's faces are delicately represented,
the horn blurred in its drop, the blind one
calling up a geyser of famous blood with his cane,
the cage of larks on the sidewalk.

6.

At the trial I sit, quietly locked inside my suit,
wanting to tell all the visionaries and visionettes
how wall predates wall predates wall,
how we stupidly bury our doubts in a pyramid
insuring that they will live forever,

and how I know,
how I have that thickness of remembered time
that comes from walking down miles of dark halls,
tracking a religion to its end.

He thought back to the time he had blown his son's mind
by making him count stars.
"And don't come in until you're finished."
It wasn't what he had intended, he said
as the kitchen clock twitched,
still wired to the universe's anatomy.

He was my assistant wrestling coach,
sobbing in the white ruins of his kitchen
for the olde tymes when the town hospital was fringed
with icicles
and the dogtrack
stands were packed with his friends.

Instead of helping I sat and watched,
desperately afraid that someone would append
a suffix to my name.

It was the marks on my chest,
(bruises from the porn magazines I propped there,
reading while expressions moved beneath my face)
that had started the rumors about auxiliary
alphabets in my home.

"There are more bears in one N.H. county," I recited at
school,
than in all of Europe."

That was long before I discovered the zen of
hospitalization,
in the archipelago of living rooms that became
the center of my physical world,
wandering through medieval Wyomings,
as a figure in the distance even to my own eye.
For a long time I dreamed of moving to
the outskirts of town
where one can still burn trash
and see the stars glint like errors in the sky.

As we drink we imagine the oceans receding,
the dark beaches sloping down like cinema floors.
We are not broken by the wayside as the birds,
tired of being watched,
move through the ring of blue darkness above Richmond.
Rain comes down at a slant as if
shot by Indians
and we are not even close to being through.

THE COAHOMA COUNTY WIND CULTS

My dream walked on four legs
towards the remote source
of a pale yellow letter

only to revolve around the cabin
when it got there.

A black and white cave rainbow
arched between two old shoes.

Oxygen bounced off the face of a doll,
looking for the slow dazzling guts
of a life form.

There was a moment of sudden clarity
when the pages burned in opera glasses,

like a herd crossing zip codes

or an exhumed idea pressing
at the limits of the marquee bulbs

my dream pushes air.

A LETTER FROM ISAAC ASIMOV TO HIS WIFE JANET

One night, studying an egg tray in my kitchen, that first novel fell together in my mind: the apes blowing blood into the air, the robot nymphs dipping their slender metal legs into an ammonia brook.

I began those flights from earth in plywood space capsules, fleeing to a place Satan could not find, that was my hope. Getting away from the chain letters, fever, rats, and unemployment, away from the dark uncles that strayed over the globe, cutting brake lines and loosening screws.

And as a Jew I asked what good are hidden things, and as a Jew I admonished myself for asking. I knew that the best things were hidden, and all of this was said in a private voice, a cousin to the one I use to call pets.

I am writing this under the illumination of an old American stereo. For once I don't need to know tomorrow's weather report. In fact I can't bear to hear it, the jealousy would kill me before midnight. Perhaps they will make jokes at Doubleday tomorrow.
I can imagine an intern asking, "what were his last ten thousand words..."

I want to know too. From my sickbed I've seen cellophane rams shimmering in the yard and cardinals that look like quarts of blood balanced in the branches. The doctor calls them apparitions.
Perhaps my last words will be random.

I am so drowsy, here listening to the wild dressage of a housefly, thinking about the loyal robots in my paperbacks. Thinking about the little chalet I would have built for you on Neptune.

A Neptune indiscernible from Vermont.

The enamelled moon
rode over the long cool world
as we stepped outside to get some air.

Birds from other area codes
sang their old songs,

the light pulse of the seminary
faded in the wax trees,

and we strolled around
talking about the burden of inheritance tax
and the elegance of watering cans.

We walked between Hill 49 and Hill 50,
then over the old river,
which was slow and thin for miles,
before it disappeared underground.

At the park's wild core,
where lamp posts frontier the old dark,
we saw the fountains remaking themselves
over and over again,

we saw the night leaking out the western doors
and talked about returning to the committee room,
to the oak chairs, ice water and gavels

when the sound of snapping branches
made us turn to see
the caribou crossing the Nikon.

APRIL 13, 1865

At first the sound had no meaning.
The shot came from the balcony,
as if the play had sprung an annex,
and I, John Sleeper Clarke,
pictured stars through oak scaffolds
as the news traveled over
the chairscape like a stain.

In that dark room lit by gas jets
the Welshman to my left conceded
the armrest we had been fighting over
while doctors and half doctors
flowed into the scarlet aisles
to help.

I remember standing up
as the others did

and how the assassin was in mid-air,
when the stagehands wheeled out clouds.

The colt opened up on the eastern grade,
breaking past the band-aid colored pigs
eating cracked pumpkins in the auburn
material world of oral tradition.

Because there was a camera rigged to the saddle
and because that camera had been battered
by low-hanging branches, it was already thrown
off center and out of focus
when the horse arrived at the bridge
for a moment of planned static reflection.

Our Keygrip was the first to recognize the problem.
"We are only picking up the inconceivably distant margins
of the script," he called out.
"Keep rolling!" I yelled on instinct.
My assistant Jerry was freaking out. "A sub-continent
of life unnoticed", he whispered in my ear.

Bunnies in triplicate suddenly appeared on the monitors.
The horse moved and we got a shot of a technician leaning
against a trailer, carefully splitting open an exit sign
as if it were a geode.

Then, out of nowhere, a parade of beautiful unnamed shapes and colors took the screen.

Jerry gasped and I sent him to get the producer on the phone.

We saw moss colonies that looked like tiny golf courses,
ice cream wrappers tumbling through gold grass,
and the bare ankles of actors returning to the trailers
to remove their caveman furs.

I could feel it all climaxing when the colt wandered
down to the riverbank. The camera was trained
on an extra standing in a thicket. He looked down
and must have realized that he'd missed a belt loop
when he got dressed that morning.

A hush fell over the set. Jerry dropped the phone
and got down on one knee. "Priceless!" he whispered.

The extra began to pull his belt off when the horse,
suddenly spooked, took off like a shot,
running due west towards the purple mountains
through which all the world's great films must pass.

TULSA

A woman named Tina drinks gin at sunset
before a pair of drawn curtains that frame
the dry grasslands and tangerine hilltops
of her native county. An insurance bill
is pinned to the desktop with a calculator.
The curtains are purple.

The man she intends to marry is reserved
like a dark prairie pond. He paints radio storms
in the basement beside a globe of Mars,
his hair and shoes the color of ox-blood.

The suburban graveyard is now run
by the private management company he owns.
Stones are strewn on the even pathways
like the exploded bits of a larger rock.
Annually, starlings fill the trees
as if commanded by a book on Death.

And she, a manicurist who digs the intimacy
of her work. Holding hands for a living.
Perfecting the extremities of oilmen and bankers.

But this man, this man she intends to marry,
is strange. She wonders, what's the deal with
quiet people, can they read minds? Just then

A junebug flies in and lands on a curtain.
The purple curtain on her right.
My left, her right.

There were mountain huts full of smallpox strung out along the hillsides between Escatawpa and Morgan City, birds boiling up and out of freestanding chimneys under the routine advent of rainbows and chainsaws, the old sound of cheap labor rising and falling in the weather that was like frosted bank glass and advancing. There were heaps of tangled sawhorses and tripwire, vacant jasper and wolframite mines, mounds of dead Ataris and scarred desk drawer bibles scattered across those abandoned counties that lay inert as rope.

Hazel and Bobby lived together in an old slave shack I used to rent out in the upper fields. They cut canadian thistle and picked sloe berries off the blackthorn for a living, slashing their hands and bickering all day in the frayed heat, visiting me in the cool main house most evenings. We'd sit in the rooms without ceilings, drinking white hill whiskey under the recombinant stars, and Bobby, who loved to go on about things, would reminisce about his dead wife who'd contracted a disease from sleeping too close to the fan. On Sundays they wouldn't move a muscle. They'd just sit there like two piles of coins, quietly warming through the afternoon, then slowly cooling off over the evening.

Bobby puts on his sound jacket. Shards of hospital bed are locked in the bass drum. Through the worn dolichoid rafters I can see birds flying over the practice room. The snare is stuffed with traffic tickets and out the window there's my horse walking on the stream, the stream always behind schedule. There's a dust mote hawk landing in slo-mo on my guitar. Hazel's saying something about Earnest Wourlds over in Tullahoma who'd had a dream about a cougar sleepwalking on Polk's grave and how that was bad luck for the region. (Those that look out the window are darkened. All those faces passed down through the centuries that kickstart the rivers and grow like nerve endings in a coal cart until they're key-cold and shoved through the deathgate, a catafalque set free, released into the dirtways.) "And John and his father John trap mink under the chain lightning in the libraries they've landed in, where all the talk about shadow dappled paths is typeset, published and poured into a break in the earth," Hazel murmured to no one in the room. You might think it was all words and dark tickets as we began to play "R.M.T" in the swarming weather chart sundown, and it was.

Outside you'd still hear the music, hear someone singing "actors dreaming got nowhere to stay/ see my sheet go walking run and fly", and it would sound better from far away, like a faded sketch of a long forgotten pacer at the Downs, all the while platinum ticks are dropping off the

trees like little Romans, onto an auburn shower curtain half-buried in the forest floor.

Already gone were the golden days of e-z credit, the days of approaching squat south-central skylines from underneath the ice blue tides of the windshield, the five cent war comets, howling saran yaps and careening school chords. All that was left, looking like two lost eyeballs on the field after Spotsylvania, were a couple of black plastic knobs in the dirt, one for tone and one for rinse.

This place is like a haunted turnpike, closed down for years, where things still happen in the little turnoffs to the renowned teenagers that never come back.

If you come in the day and you're lucky, you might might catch yourself a nice photograph of two sweatbees fucking on a coke mirror. You might see my horse breaking across a white wine colored clearing, or maybe hear the old chords coming, for no real reason, out of sockets in the walls. ("because there's an answering machine clogged with ice, deep in the Courthouse Mountains where he lived and died in the breech.")

I'd found it in the National Directory of Silent Places.
An old four storey Northeastern seaside hotel
with corridors of constant night.

Walking out on the beach, saltwater sprayed up
and froze into little pearls on my black coat.
And President McKinley hardly dead a week.

I'd not spoken to a soul in three days
when there was a knock at my door.

A huge midwesterner stood in the doorway.
Sideburns the size of bucknife sheaths from temple to jaw.
Hello sir, he said, I was wondering if you might have a
light.

I motioned to the candle on the desk.

He revealed he was a business traveler from Nebraska
as he drew his cigar, lit it, and sat down in the burgundy
armchair.

Lamplight slowly twisted on the walls.

Don't you find it lonely here, he asked.

It is a lonely place, I agreed.

I thought back to his actions a moment before.

Did you ever hear that it's bad luck to light a cigar on a candle flame, I asked.

No sir, I have not heard of that.

Yes, I continued, it's said that a sailor dies at sea for every cigar lit on a candle.

He grunted and looked deep into the fiery tip of his cigar.

But sir, he finally responded, how can you determine whether your action has caused his death.

Maybe it is his death that compels you to light your cigar.

In a kind of tribute?

Perhaps.

We both grew silent.

In due time he left.

SERENADE FOR A WEALTHY WIDOW

Nude descending staircase headless,
not knowing where she is going
but brave because all dreams lack conclusions
and she is not enlisted to an ending.

The abstract cannons in the background
are still unfired, still the temperature of a bird,
while a depth charge buried in blue paint speckles
the door plaques and crab apples of S Street.

In the morning you rise from your bed
and the self-portraits come streaming in.
A cold black maple hangar clatters to the floor
sputtering police language now, blank, now.

Ideas reach out with dwarf arms, rheumy eyed,
covered in weak syntax and powderburns.
From here at your office at the end of the river
where messages still trickle in from the interior

like I am here and I am still here.

THE ARMY

The red fox jumps over the lazy brown dog
beside the driveway where the green LTD
purrs in its
adolescence.
A breeze appears at sunset like the sigh of a Mexican maid,
the faraway fox now barely visible in the deep red light.

Sometimes livestock enter a portal
and the farmer must get in the LTD
to drive his worries away.
He drives by old tennis courts the color of currency
wearing the sunglasses his son brought back from L.A.
The backlit pine trees look like arrowheads,
(the price tag still hanging from the plastic stem).

At a traffic light the sun turns
in the spokes of a fruit tree
as a gang of heavy metal kids move through the crosswalk.
The farmer is remembering a moment in Italy during the war
when a gob of spit lands on the hood ornament.

He'd been standing in an empty piazza at midnight
(the kid turns to laugh)
wondering whether he should go stab it again.

Hand rockets race into the tiered skies,
and down a winding lane of teeth,
o unemployed girls, unemployed girls,
to not clutch you, wells and caves,
flash candles and whirling roots,
"could you watch my scotch"
while the remembering pieces,
while a long hooked puddle
translates a long hooked sky.

The morgue in autumn
and black debts falling,
stones run to the rotten loch,
"this is my first universe",
from the last heartbeats
of an old shopping plaza,
to the letters oiled in truancy
and dark halls, slurred speech,
"I did live in a warm age",

it was an office like a magnolia tree.

An office like a magnolia tree.

THE CHARM OF 5:30

It's too nice a day to read a novel set in England.

We're within inches of the perfect distance from the sun,
the sky is blueberries and cream,
and the wind is as warm as air from a tire.
Even the headstones in the graveyard
seem to stand up and say "Hello! my name is..."

I don't need to be eating starfish in El Segundo,
or dreaming of cocktails on the beaches of Biloxi.

It's enough to be sitting here on my porch,
thinking about Kermit Roosevelt, following the course of an ant,
or walking out into the yard with a cordless phone
to find out that she is going to be there tonight.

On a day like today, what looks like bad news in the distance
turns out to be something on my contact, carports and white courtesy phones are spontaneously reappreciated
and random "o.k."s ring through the backyards.

Just this morning I accidentally discovered the red in cola
when I held a glass of it up to the light
and found an expensive flashlight in the pocket of a winter coat
as I was packing it away for the summer.

It all reminds me of that instant when you take off your sunglasses after a long drive and realize that it's earlier and lighter out than you had accounted for.

Hey, you must be thinking, he's more like myself than I thought at first.

And that's the kind of fellowship that's taking place in town, out in the public spaces. You won't overhear anyone using the words "dramaturgy" or "state inspection" today. We're too busy getting along.

It occurs to me that the laws are in the regions and the regions are in the laws, and it feels good to say this, something that I'm almost sure is true, outside under the sun.

Then to say it again, around friends, in the resounding voice of a nineteenth century senator, just for a lark.

Notice this shy looking fellow on the courthouse steps, holding up a placard that says "But, I kinda liked Reagan". His head turns slowly as a beautiful girl walks by, holding a refrigerated bottle against her flushed cheek.

She smiles at me and I, imperceptibly relaxed, allow myself to imagine her walking into town to buy lotion at a brick pharmacy.

When she gets home she'll apply it with great lingering care before moving into her parlor to play old 78 records and drink perfect gin and tonics by her homemade altar to James Madison.

In a town of this size, it's certainly possible that I will be invited over one night this summer.

In fact I'll bet you something.

Somewhere in the future I am remembering today. I'll bet you I am remembering how I walked into the park at five thirty, my favorite time of day, and how I found two cold pitchers of just poured beer, sitting there on the bench.

I am remembering how my friend Chip showed up
with a catcher's mask hanging from his belt and how I said

great to see you, sit down, have a beer, how are you,
and how he turned to me with the sunset reflecting off his
contacts and said, wonderful, how are you.